

Gambling on Gorbachev

PRESIDENT BUSH, so often criticized as timid, is gambling, and gambling boldly, on Mikhail Gorbachev. The president had the choice of slowing summit preparations until Soviet policy in Lithuania had passed the test of American conscience and opinion. Instead, he decided to keep up the superpower momentum and to forge ahead with a Washington summit, starting on May 30, and even to advance it a few weeks for the convenience of Mr. Gorbachev's calendar. In other words, he apparently did not make the early summit meeting contingent on the outcome of the Soviets' power squeeze on Lithuania.

The risk is, of course, that Mr. Gorbachev will think he can have his way in Vilnius and in Washington too. We think he would be wrong to so conclude. Mr. Bush may be unready, publicly at least, to say that Mr. Gorbachev is relentlessly cutting the corners of his promise not to use force in Lithuania; the Soviet leader insists he is merely enforcing the law. Congress, however, is increasingly in a mood to keep its hand on some of the economic and other benefits that Mr. Gorbachev hopes will flow from a summit, and these will surely be conditioned on what happens in the Baltics. We trust President Bush was able to convey to the Soviet foreign minister that, reluctant as the United States would be to take the step, there is a degree of Soviet repression of the independence movements now troubling it that will provoke a strong American response. Such familiar "linkage" exists as it always has on

two levels: as a tool available for diplomatic wielding and as a blunt fact of political life.

Meanwhile, it is logical for Mr. Bush to pursue the benefits for the United States that lie in the arms control, regional, economic and other issues under negotiation with the Soviet Union. These are things desirable in themselves and essential to deepening the current, generally positive trend of world events. A summit is the accepted, useful and necessary mechanism for giving political impetus to these matters and for resolving what Mr. Shevardnadze called the residual "hard choices." As everyone was reminded by the hitches and hesitations that developed in the talks in Washington last week, there is nothing easy or automatic about reaching agreements even with a Soviet leader regarded as conciliatory. No one familiar with the long and frustrating efforts to reap benefits on the scale now being sought can look lightly on the possibility that they will be lost.

Precisely there lies the responsibility of the Soviet Union to act in a way—the respectful way that the vaunted Soviet "new thinking" supposedly dictates—that will let this process go forward. Mr. Gorbachev has the initiative here; the United States is in a strictly reactive role. No one denies that Mr. Gorbachev faces a dilemma in Lithuania. But his standing and perhaps also his durability as a political leader depend on his capacity to resolve that dilemma in terms at one with the Soviet Union's new international obligations.